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Source: *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Apr., 1933), pp. 337-348

Published by: [University of Pennsylvania Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1451934>

Accessed: 03-11-2015 23:41 UTC

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THE GRAECO-ROMAN VIEW OF JEWS AND JUDAISM IN THE SECOND CENTURY

By NORMAN BENTWICH

THE second century of the civil era saw the supreme crisis of the Jewish people and of Judaism. In the previous century the national center had been destroyed, and the national and religious existence were threatened. It was a fundamental principle of Roman policy to war down the proud, *debellare superbos*, as their great poet expressed it; and the "obstinate superstition" of the Jews, and the challenge of the small people to the might of the great empire seemed to call for the sternest and most thorough repression. The struggle against the Roman rule in the national rebellion of 66–70 C.E. was mainly confined to Palestine; but the audacity of the Jews of Palestine, as the Romans conceived it, reacted upon the Jews of the Diaspora in the succeeding era. There were violent outbreaks in countries where the Jewish population was considerable; and a determined attempt was made to exterminate the one national people who remained within the melting-pot of the Empire. In Palestine the Jews were continually bursting into desperate revolt for a half-century after the destruction of the Temple by Titus. And we may be sure that they were driven to these desperate outbreaks in and out of Palestine by an oppression of all that was dearest to them which could not be borne. During the so-called golden age of the Antonine Emperors, when Gibbon would have us believe that the world was happier and better governed than at any other period, the Jews were undergoing this prolonged agony. Rising followed rising not only

in Palestine but over the whole of the East, and took on the form of wars of extermination.

Yet Judaism and the Jewish people survived, and not only survived but carried on an active and successful mission. They won for their faith the privilege of a *Licita Religio*, a privileged creed, and they spread their tenets in all parts of the Graeco-Roman world and outside it. The words which Seneca, the Roman statesman and philosopher, had used of them a few years before the struggle began:—"The customs of this most wicked race have prevailed so far as to be received in all countries. The conquered have imposed their laws on the victors." (*Usque eo sceleratissimae gentis consuetudo valet ut per omnes jam terras recepta sit; victi victoribus leges dederunt*).¹—These words still most aptly described the position of the Jewish people after that life and death struggle. It is interesting to bring together from the Greek and Roman writers of the second century and the succeeding epoch the notices of the Jewish people and of Judaism, and to reconstruct a picture of this obstinate race and obstinate creed, as it appeared to the writers of a perplexed pagan society.

It must be remembered, indeed, that the historians of that age are frequently, in fact usually, not witnesses of truth, but wrote consciously as rhetoricians and propagandists, and flatterers of their royal masters. The writers of history had lost a sense of exactness and of objective statement such as the historians of the golden age of Hellenism had affected. Now truth did not seem sufficiently impressive, and it must be embellished with exaggeration and distortion. To meet the "demand for brighter history", each writer tried to outdo the others in the luridness of his narrative and the forcefulness of his language. And the distortions of the pagan historians cannot be checked in this

¹ Cited in Augustine, *De Civ. Dei*, VI, 10.

epoch by the writings of any Jewish chronicle. There is not even a Josephus of the second century. The only witness who can be brought to rebut the pagan is the Christian, and the Christian chroniclers of these times, who were not contemporary with the events, had their "tendency" to advance. They were, however, less induced, or less tempted, to invent, and they had more understanding of what Judaism meant and stood for. But the chief and most valuable check on the aberrations of the historians is to be found in the incidental remarks and the asides about Judaism and the Jews which occur in the writings of the literary and philosophical masters of the decadent society. It has been said that "truth will out even in an affidavit"; and so too it may be claimed that truth about Judaism is to be found in the remarks of those who had nothing further from their minds than the giving of a testimonial to a creed which they did not understand and which they despised or even hated.

Let us consider first the passages in the historians about the wars of the Jews in this second century when there were the successive outbreaks against Rome in the days of Trajan, Hadrian and Antoninus Pius, that is, from about 100 C.E. to 140 C.E. There is one contemporary historian who took part himself in the campaign against the Jews of Egypt when they rose in the reign of Trajan. He is Appian, a native of Alexandria, who wrote a series of books on the earlier Roman history upon an ethnographical plan, dealing with the Roman relations with the different peoples, Carthaginians, Parthians, etc. But his references to the Jewish wars are brief. In describing the tomb of Pompey who was assassinated in Egypt, he says: "The burial place was destroyed by the Jews in the exigencies of war during my time, when Trajan was exterminating the Jewish race." (*Civil Wars* 2, 90). And in dealing with

the Syrians he says that "the Jews were destroyed by Pompey, Vespasian and Hadrian in our time. And on account of their rebellions the poll tax imposed on them was heavier than that imposed on the surrounding peoples."²

A fuller and more lurid account is given in the history of Dio Cassius who wrote a century later, after there had been time for the stories to grow. His date is 160–230 C.E.; and he was a most industrious writer who compiled a history of Rome in 80 books from the legendary beginnings of Rome to his own age. A large part has survived only in epitome; and the account of the Jewish risings is in that part. He was of the impressionistic school, and loved the sensational picture. Thus of the rising in the time of Trajan against the Greeks in Cyprus, Egypt and Cyrene, he tells us that "the Jews were destroying both Greeks and Romans. They ate the flesh of their victims, made belts for themselves out of their entrails, and anointed themselves with their blood . . . In all, 220,000 men perished in Cyrene, and 240,000 in Cyprus and for this reason no Jew may set foot in Cyprus."³

Of the struggle in Palestine against Hadrian he gives us similar striking details. "Hadrian founded a city in place of that which had been razed, naming it Aelia Capitolina; and on the site of the temple he raised a new temple to Jupiter. This brought on a war of no slight importance and of lengthy duration: for the Jews deemed it intolerable that foreigners should be settled in their city and foreign rites planted there. At first they conducted a guerrilla warfare and the Romans took no account of them. Then the Jews everywhere showed vigor, giving evidence of hostility to the Romans partly by secret and partly by overt acts. Many outside peoples were joining them, and

² *Syrian Wars*, ch. 50.

³ *Epit.* Bk. 68, 22.

the whole earth, so to say, was stirred over the matter. Hadrian then had to send his best generals against them. First of them was Julius Severus who was despatched from Britain. Severus did not dare to attack his opponents in the open, in view of their number and their desperateness. But by forming small groups and by depriving them of food he was able slowly but surely to crush, exhaust, and exterminate them. Few in fact survived. Fifty of their most important posts and 985 villages were razed to the ground; 580,000 men were slain in raids and battles; and the number who perished by famine, disease, and fire is impossible to find out. Nearly the whole of Judea was made desolate, a result of which the people had forewarning. For the tomb of Solomon which they revere fell to pieces of itself and collapsed.”⁴

There is a more interesting reference to the beliefs of the Jewish people in the earlier part of the work of Dio. He is recounting the campaign of Pompey, and describing the capture of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day when the Jews would not fight. And he has a little aside on the name Jews which was “applied not only to the inhabitants of Judea but also to the rest of mankind, though of alien race, who have affected their customs. The class exists even among Romans; and though often repressed, it has increased to a great extent and has won its way to a right of freedom for its observances. They are distinguished from the rest of mankind in almost every detail of life, and especially by the fact that they do not honor the usual gods and show extreme reverence for a particular deity. They have dedicated to him the day of Saturn on which, among other peculiar observances, they undertake no serious occupation.”⁵

⁴ Ep. Bk. 69, 12 and 13.

⁵ Bk. 37, ch. 17.

Here we see the typical pagan's assumed or real surprise at the Jewish exclusiveness and his monotheism, and also the tribute to the effectiveness of the mission of a conquered nation. As regards the account of the Jewish rising, we can find some basis of comparison in the history of Eusebius the Church Historian, Bishop of Caesarea, who wrote, indeed, two centuries after the events, but must have had access to Jewish and Gentile contemporary records. He, no doubt, was anxious to show that the Jews were suffering untold woes while the teachings of the Christians were spreading, and he therefore does not understate the calamity which befell them. But he has no word of the sensational outrages. Of the rising against the Greeks in the days of Trajan he says: "In the 18th year the rebellion broke out which destroyed a great multitude of them. For in Alexandria and the rest of Egypt, and especially in Cyrene, they were seized by some terrible spirit of rebellion; they rushed into sedition against their Greek fellows, and started a great war. In the first engagement they overcame the Greeks who fled to Alexandria and killed the Jews of that city. The Jews of Cyrene continued to plunder the country and ravage the districts, till the Emperor sent against them Marcus Turbo who killed many thousands. The emperor, suspecting that the Jews in Mesopotamia would join, ordered Quietus to clear them out of that province; and he murdered a great number, and for this service was made governor of Judea." (*Hist. Eccl.* 4, 2).

Of the rising in Palestine under Bar-Kochba the same writer says: "Hadrian commanded that by decree the whole nation should be prevented from entering even the district around Jerusalem, so that not even from a distance could they see their ancestral home. When the ancient inhabitants had completely perished, it was colonized by foreigners and

Romans with the name of Aelia in honor of the Emperor, Aelius Hadrian." (Ib. 4, 6).

We have one other but very inadequate authority about the origin of this last revolt of the Jewish people. In the time of the later empire a collection of the lives of the emperors was made and is known as "*Historia Augusta*." In the life of Hadrian there are two references to the war. "At the outset of the reign the emperor had to deal with risings of the various nations which had been conquered by Trajan. Palestine showed the spirit of rebellion, and the revolt was put down by Turbo." Then later: "the Jews began another war because they were forbidden to practice circumcision."⁶ By the time these lines were written, the Jews were no longer the object of general hate; and it is notable that the reference to their struggles is cursory and unembroidered.

If we turn now to the other references in the Graeco-Roman literature to the Jews and to Judaism, it is interesting to trace three stages of good-humored contempt, bitter hatred, and enforced respect which are marked in the writings composed before, during, and after the dire struggle respectively. A typical writer of the first stage is Petronius who flourished in the second half of the first century and wrote satires and poems, and a famous study of Roman decadent manners, "*The Banquet*." In that last book there is one Jewish character, a servant, who is a skilled imitator of animals. The one reproach against him, says his master, is that he is a Jew. And in one of the poems he writes of the Jew who may "worship his pig-god and denounce in the ears of high heaven; but unless he is circumcised he shall go forth from the holy city cast forth from the people and transgress the Sabbath by breaking

⁶ *Hist. Aug. Hadrian* ch. 5 and 14.

the law of fasting.”⁷ This would seem to be a confused idea of the distinction between the “proselytes of righteousness” and the “proselytes of the gate.” The pagan poet suggests that those who do not adopt the whole of the Jewish law are no better than the Gentiles in the eyes of the true Jews. Another writer of satires of the same epoch, Persius, gives the Jewish convert as the typical example of superstitious reverence. “But when the day of Herod comes, and the lamps on the grimy sills garlanded with violets disgorge their unctuous smoke clouds, when the tail of a tunny fish fills its red dish, and the white jar bursts with wine, you move your lips in silent dread and turn pale at the Sabbath of the circumcised.”⁸ Here, as with Petronius, there is no attempt to represent correctly the Jewish religion; or rather, there is a confusion, probably deliberate, of its beliefs and ceremonies. Similarly, the greatest of the Roman satirists of the Silver Age, Juvenal, writes: “Those whose lot it is to have a father that reveres the Sabbath worship nothing but the clouds and sky, and think that the flesh of swine from which their father abstained is closely related to that of man.”⁹ But if Judaism is misunderstood, it is recognized as the type of religion which is winning the common people.

With these statements of the Latin satirists it is interesting to compare the observation of a famous Greek writer of the same age. Plutarch is perhaps the most popular author who has come down to us from the period; and his testimony is the more striking in that he lived far away from the metropolis of Rome, in his Greek village of Chaeronea; and his opinions are those of the ordinary man of culture without any political prepossession. One of his Moral Essays deals with the topic of Superstition; and he gives

⁷ *Petr. Poems*, 24.

⁸ *Persius Sat.* V, 176.

⁹ *Juv. Sat.* XIV, 96.

as an example of unreasoning inhibitions the Jews who, "because it was the Sabbath, sat in their places immovable while the enemy were planting ladders against the wall, and did not get up, fast-bound in the toils of superstition as in a great net."¹⁰ He is apparently using a commonplace from the contemporary historians about the capture of Jerusalem by the Roman Pompey who was said to have taken the holy city on the Sabbath when the Jews refused to fight. The current idea of the cultured pagan about Judaism was that it was a most profound superstition.

It was probably on account of this idea that Vespasian and Titus did not receive the title of Judaicus after their triumph over the Jewish people.¹¹ The name would be ambiguous. It might suggest that the conquerors had been infected with the superstition of the conquered.

Of the more hostile view which was taken during the struggle we have an example in the life of a curious figure of the social history of the Silver Age, the wonder-working Apollonius of Tyana. That worthy whose doings and sayings were recorded as a kind of gospel was for a time exalted as a rival of the founder of Christianity. He was at the height of his fame during the wars of the Jews against Titus; and Vespasian visited him at Alexandria during the campaign to obtain the omens for his bid for the imperial purple. Apollonius, it is said, refused to come to Palestine "a country which the inhabitants polluted by what they did and what they suffered."¹² The counsel of another sophist of Alexandria which is recorded in the same work is remarkable for its account of Jewish exclusiveness. One Euphrates advised that Vespasian should use his army against Nero and not against the Jews: "For the Jews have long been in revolt not only against Rome but against

¹⁰ *Plut. Moralia, Superstit.* 8.

¹¹ *Dio Cass. Ep. Bk. 65, 7.*

¹² *Apoll. Vit.* V, 27.

humanity; and a race that has made its own life apart and irreconcilable, that cannot share with the rest of mankind in the pleasures of the table nor join in sacrifices or in prayer, are separated from ourselves by a greater gulf than divides us from Susa or India. And what sense or reason was there in chastising them for revolting from us, when we had better never have annexed them!"¹³ Perhaps the sophist was a disguised Judaizer who sought in this way to divert the might of Rome from the destruction of the Jewish center. We find a similar expression of contempt in the writings of the master of oratory in the age of the Flavian Caesars. Quintilian (fl. 35–100 C.E.) gives as an example of the topic of denunciation that the vices of the children bring hatred on the parents: "And the founders of cities are detested for concentrating a race which is a curse to others, as e.g., the founder of the Jewish superstition."¹⁴ Doubtless his royal patrons would expect any reference to the nation which they had conquered after a great struggle to be in this strain.

Half a century later the tone of the Graeco-Roman writers about Judaism is different. One of the teachers of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius was the orator Fronto, of whom a number of letters have survived. In one of these letters addressed to his royal pupil he writes: "I stick fast in Rome, bound with golden fetters, looking forward to September 1st, as the superstitious to a star at the sight of which they break their fast . . ." The reference is here to the Jews breaking their fast on the Day of Atonement when the star of evening is visible. And two things are notable; the writer knows something of Jewish ceremonial, and he treats the Jew as the ready illustration of religious zeal, as to-day a writer might treat the Christian Scientists.

Still more remarkable is the reference to the Jews in

¹³ Ib. V, 33.

¹⁴ *Instit. Or.* III, 7.21.

another guide of the Emperor and the friend of Hadrian, the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, who flourished at the end of the first and beginning of the second century. He belongs indeed to an earlier generation, but he was high-minded enough to be free from the utterance of prejudice or invective, which was usual concerning the Jews in his day. His Discourses have achieved lasting fame, and are taken as the finest expression of the creed of unemotional self-reliance. Dealing with the theme of sincerity, he writes: "Do you not see in what sense men are called Jews, Syrians, etc.? For example, when we see a man halting between two opinions, we are in the habit of saying, 'He is not a Jew: he is only acting a part.' But when he adopts the attitude of mind of a man who has been baptized and made his choice, then he is both a Jew in fact and is also called one. So we are counterfeit Baptists, ostensibly Jews but in reality something else, and not in sympathy with our own reason, and far from applying the principles we profess, yet priding ourselves on them as being men who know them."¹⁵

The meaning of the passage is not altogether clear, so far as it applies to the Stoics themselves. But what is clear is that the Jews are the type immediately chosen of a missionary people who are making converts in great numbers, some being genuine and some half-believers. And this comes from a leader of a philosophical school who must have regretted that mission. It has been suggested that the Jews in the passage are a mistake for Christians; and the reference to Baptists gives some color to this idea. But in another part of his work Epictetus refers to the Christians as the Galileans,¹⁶ which makes it clear that he distinguished them from the Jews. And while it is likely that he confused their tenets about baptism with the Jewish observances, the testimony to the Jewish mission is not

¹⁵ *Med.* II, 9, 19.

¹⁶ *Med.* IV, 7.6.

affected by this fact. That the distinction between Jew and Christian was recognized in the Roman world from this time is indicated by the letters of Pliny (fl. 100 C.E.) who wrote to the Emperor Trajan about the treatment to be given to the followers of the heresy in the province of Pontus of which he was governor. He proposed to his master that he should execute those who were denounced and persevered in the superstition after being warned: "For whatever the nature of the creed might be, I could at least feel no doubt that contumacy and obstinacy deserved chastisement."¹⁷

It was not till the beginning of the third century that the spirit of religious tolerance was firmly established; and then a distinction was still made between the tenets of Judaism which were *privileged*, and the tenets of Christian teaching which were *allowed*. In the lives of the Emperors already mentioned it is recorded of the noble Severus Alexander (208–235 C.E.) that "he respected the privileges of the Jews, and permitted the Christians to exist unmolested." And it is further recorded of him that he kept in his chamber, by the side of the pagan images, statues of holy men, including Abraham and Christ. He would quote too the golden rule, and had it written up in his palace and public buildings. He heard it from a Jew or a Christian, says the chronicler.¹⁸

By that time the Jewish religion was in no danger from the pagan rulers. It had not only won security for itself, but it was openly recognized as one of the great religious forces by the leading writers and thinkers of the Greek and Roman world. The new danger, then unseen, was to arise when its own offspring was to prevail in that empire which had sought in vain to crush the parent stem.

¹⁷ Pliny *Epist.* X, 96.

¹⁸ *Hist. Aug. Severus*, ch. 22.